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THE NEW SOCIALISM

BY JOHN CORBIN

SYNDICALIST, I. W. W., Bolshevik: the words have become mere epithets—"names," as the children say. Yet in the idea that lies behind the new Socialism, if we envisage it dispassionately, we shall, I think, find much that is plausible. In its English development as Guild Socialism, there is much that in all probability is fruitful, both for the individual and for the nation.

In one sense, and a very real sense, the industrial worker is, as the Socialists so passionately declare, a wage slave. All the instruments of his labor are owned by the employing class—beings of a different world, whom he never sees. In some respects the wage slave is worse off than the chattel slave. When he is wanted his labor is bought, like any commodity, at the market price. When he is not wanted—when employers can no longer extract a profit from his labor—they turn him off to shift for himself, as no owner of chattel slaves ever did. For he is not a man to them but only what they call him, a hand. And what is his labor? The days of chattel slavery knew nothing like it. Thanks to the perfection of machinery, the old crafts are dying or dead. The "hand" feeds a machine, performing the same simple shift eight hours, ten hours, twelve hours a day—and often in ill-lighted, ill-heated, unsanitary surroundings. His whole life is dominated alternately by the spectre of grinding labor and the spectre of unemployment that spells destitution. For him the progress of civilization, the vast modern increase of material wealth, has come to this, that he is bound to a neo-barbarian master whose god is an iron, steam-driven Moloch, to whom millions are daily sacrificed. . . . The picture is no doubt luridly colored; but few will deny it a grim verisimilitude.

Is it strange that the mind of slum-ridden industrial England dreams backward to the Mediæval Guild, in which the workman

owned his own tools—was capitalist as well as laborer—and so was able to practice his craft when and where he liked? Then each job brought him a new problem to solve, each employer a new acquaintance and possibly friend. Freedom, even democracy, in labor flourished as never since that golden age. But the return to the Golden Age—that is the problem. What is it that has to be undone? What is the essence of the change, the force behind the machine, the evil above the employer—who is so often not ill-disposed? There is more at stake than the problem of labor and capital. Something has happened of which Karl Marx took no note and of which the world outside the circle of the new Socialism is as yet dimly aware.

In that old society, down to the “industrial revolution” of the late eighteenth century, the unit of the state was territorial, civic. As each worker was an individual—owning the tools of his labor, self-sufficient and free—so was each community. It grew its own food, provided its own transportation, manufactured its own familiar necessities from shoes and stockings, plows and wagons, to cakes and ale. Today the city of guilds has vanished but there are traces still of the rural industrial unit. In the remote English countryside and far up on the New England hills there are farmhouses with the old smithy and cobblers’ bench, the old brew house and cider mill, still standing; with the old loom, spinning wheel and candle dips in the dusty gloom of the garret. And like the farm, the village and the county were each self-contained, industrially as politically. No other unit of representation and government was possible. These territorial divisions remain our political units and function as best they may—which is not very well. Meanwhile mankind, which in spite of Aristotle is primarily industrial, has pushed his industrial far beyond his political development—has wrought out new units which are more complex, more powerful.

Instead of the local wheelwright who fashioned the farm wagon and family coach we have the automobile factory, the locomotive works; instead of the farm or village blacksmith we have the steel industry; instead of the spinning-wheel and loom, the textile industry; instead of the wood lot, the coal mines—and each basic industry is organized upon a national scale, or

easily capable of becoming so. Upon the old "horizontal" units of territory we have erected "vertical" units of industry. And—man being still primarily and most dynamically an industrial animal—these new units comprise the really organic and functional life of the nation. In America we lament the decay of the character and power of our territorial units. Our cities are notoriously inefficient in their own government and corrupt in their dealings with business corporations. Our sovereign States have seen their powers, one by one, pass into other hands. State rights and local sovereignty, to the preservation of which a great political party was dedicated, exist no more except for the minor purposes of civil as distinguished from industrial government. And the reason is that, with a single exception, all that nourishes life and makes it powerful has ceased to be local and is organized on a national scale. Even the farmers, in their ceaseless struggle against nationwide units of manufacture and transportation, are being forced into national organizations. Considered as live industrial forces, township and county and State are no more. Yet our political life is still organized, represented, ruled, by men chosen, not on any functional basis but on the basis of territorial units—empty shells from which the seeds of life have vanished.

The result is evident in the personnel and character of legislative bodies. Throughout the world, and not least so in the United States, one type of man is strangely absent. The great master of industry—manufacturer, railway president, engineer—whose reputation within his industry is nationwide, is seldom prominent in the locality where he lives; or, if he is, it is mainly because of his wealth—which makes him envied or feared and often also derided, most of all when his public benefactions are an enduring monument. The door to political advancement is barred by his very achievements. Even if he were eligible to public life he is too busy to mingle much among political folk, with whom he has little in common; and in point of fact he is too thoroughly engrossed with vital affairs to spend the days of his youth in ward politics or the days of his prime in the futile manoeuvres of Congress. What type of men, then, do become our "representatives"? Some of them are newspaper proprietors whose "or-

gans" have made them locally known; some are dealers in public franchises whose money making has given them the dubious political touch. But most of them are lawyers, whose profession admits of protracted absences from their offices and whose talent it is to talk glibly and convincingly to the democratic or jury type of intelligence.

In the House of Representatives that saw the end of the World War and the beginning of the period of reconstruction there were over two hundred and sixty lawyers—far more than a majority. And where were the great captains of industry? Under stress of war we had called them into the public service, each in the field of which he was master; and the result, here as in England, was a sudden grasp and power in administration which alone enabled us to mobilize the resources of the nation in time to avert disaster. When the victory was won we sent them back again, each to his isolated industry. But we kept the lawyers at Washington, where they continue to frame the laws that make or mar our great dynamic industries—their eyes attentively fixed, not upon the vital organs of the nation but on the petty passions and prejudices of the motley groups of citizens in their empty and functionless constituencies. This gap, or rather dead wall, between government and industry was the real origin of the late reign of graft. The country was in the throes of a gigantic material development and the only sure way to obtain constructive legislation and the necessary franchises was to buy them. Our return to virtue—to such virtue as we may claim—coincided, ironically enough, with the ending of the era of the titans. The same lack of functional adjustment may be seen today, in a less sensational but no less harmful form, in the failure of our Government to seize the opportunities and privileges which the war bequeathed us. Our commerce cries out to overrun the world but the governmental means are lacking. There are no birds in last year's nests, nor are the great constructive leaders of the nation any longer in Congress.

New Socialists of the various Syndicalist stripes, as opposed to the English Guildsmen, propose to disestablish the state of territorial units and erect in its place a state of industrial units, organized both locally and nationally—the steel trade, the textile

trade, the mines, the railways and the rest, corresponding in sovereignty to our territorial States. The National Government is to be composed of representatives of all industries. And this new state is to be as democratic in theory as the present political state—more democratic in practice. The worker is to be no longer a “hand,” forced to barter his labor as a commodity in order to stave off destitution; he is to be a free citizen, with an equal share in the tools and product of his labor and freely electing those who control his industry. Slavery to the machine will cease. Only then will modern society become democratic in its major, the industrial, function.

Such, for example, is the programme of the Industrial Workers of the World. To most Americans the I. W. W. is, according as he is active or quiescent, a grisly anarchist or a comic supplement joke—the familiar “Wobbly” or “I Won’t Work.” But listen to the message of Daniel De Leon, who with Haywood and Berger founded the movement. It was delivered in 1905, when Syndicalism was an esoteric doctrine, Guild Socialism unborn and Bolshevism undreamed of; but it is today the dominant thought of Nikolai Lenin, who accepts De Leon as a prophet and regards his own dictatorship of the proletariat only as a necessary transition to a Utopia of industrial democracy.

As the slough shed by the serpent, which immediately appears in its new skin, the political state will have been shed; and society will simultaneously appear in its new administrative garb. The mining, the railroad, the textile industries, down or up the line, each of these, regardless of former political boundaries, will be the constituencies of the new central authority. . . . Where the General Executive Board of the Industrial Workers of the World will sit, there will be the nation’s Capitol. Like the flimsy card houses that children raise, the present political government of countries, of States, aye, of the city on the Potomac itself, will tumble down, their places taken by the central and subordinate administrative organs of the nation’s industrial forces!

The vision that inspired De Leon was adumbrated (between 1894 and 1901) by Fernand Pelloutier, an anarchistic French labor leader; it was expounded and philosophized, between 1898 and 1910, by Georges Sorel, a successful French engineer who retired with a fortune and became the prophet of Syndicalism—until he gave it over, disillusioned. In Italy it was powerfully

advocated by Arturo Labriola—who subsequently undreamed it and became Minister of Labor. In Russia the revolution brought an opportunity to make it actual, and a failure, in the flesh. In England a doubt arose, a constructive doubt destined to keep the faith alive.

Why abolish the political state? Can it not still be of service as an aid, perhaps as partner? It has long been used to preserving civil order, at home, to conducting foreign relations, to waging war when it came to that. The Guildsman perceives that the society of his dreams is only a seed in the soil of the present; and though a seed—which is to say a new and true idea, is the mightiest thing in nature—the soil must be prepared and watered. The revolution can come, if it is to come in full strength, only as a far-reaching reorganization of the infinitely complex, inter-related and persistent world of today. As opposed to the grandiose internationalism of Marx and Lenin, Guild Socialism is temperately national. And now, since the lesson of Moscow, the Guildsman is more than ever convinced of the need of a political state as partner of the industrial state. “Let us not put down the tyranny of capital only to set up another in its place.”

There may be those who see in even this Fabian Syndicalism, with its expropriation of private property and its redoubled emphasis upon the right of the *demos* to rule, a menace to all they hold dear. Yet even they must grant that it embodies a searching criticism of the modern political state and a most suggestive programme for social reconstruction. Nor is this all. In the tumultuous world of today Guild Socialism is the most powerful antidote against Bolshevism. From each of the great Western nations radical emissaries have journeyed to Moscow and have come home disillusioned—and illumined.

In the autumn of 1920 Italian metal workers seized the plants, locked out the owners, held the police at bay with machine guns, and busily began to operate the industry on the “democratic” basis. Lenin shouted encouragement from afar. Malatesta raged up and down the land and to and fro in it, inciting anarchistic violence in a general uprising. The Giolitti Government seemed as powerless to stop his criminal utterances as it was to

protect corporate property. Italy, victorious in the war and with its racial boundaries reestablished, seemed about to go down in a red sunset. Meantime Socialist leaders—Daragona, Turati, Baldesi—said quite confidently that there would be no revolution; that the moving idea of the workers was not Bolshevism, or even pure Syndicalism, but the more peaceable and reasonable doctrine that had been prominently advanced in England—and, sure enough, the red revolution paled to a general debate, a parliamentary pink tea. In France the Communist Party has accepted the Moscow programme; but the General Confederation of Labor, assembled at Orange, refused flattering overtures from the Moscow International by a vote of 1,478 to 602—stood by their own idea of local autonomy in Syndicalism and by the patriotic policy of Millerand. In Republican Germany the New Constitution provides for the democratization of industry in a manner that is admittedly inspired by English precept—and Bolshevism has been held at bay.

In the United States Bolshevism is, if we would only realize it, not even a voice of power. The Russian Red is more pitifully futile than the I. W. W. The ultimate shrine of his fame is the comic supplement. But to those who fear the ferment of ideas and the changes it works, which are subversive as they are subtle and gradual, Guild Socialism is a portent. In the Railway Brotherhoods, once a very bulwark of conservatism, it is embodied in a definite programme, the Plumb Plan. It is said by those who should know to have been the inspiration of the “outlaw” railway strikes of 1920. Miners and dock workers are not over-given to ideas, but in the light of the new faith they have steeled their hearts against the more violent programme. An I. W. W. who made his way before a meeting of longshoremen strikers was so decisively ejected that he collided with a passing automobile and ended the evening in a hospital.

Among the more mentally nimble clothing workers, the new Socialism is a passion and an inspiration. Mainly Jews of the new immigration from Central Europe, they were for many years miserably sweated in slum tenements; but, through repeated and heroic efforts, they eventually organized themselves into a union of the “industrial” type, extended it far and wide through the

country and gained victory after victory over their employers. Today they are among the most fortunately situated of our laborers, both as to wages and as to hours. Mainly middle-class folk at home, their hard lot here has made them Socialists. Their programme, as indicated by Messrs. J. H. Budish and George Soule in *The New Unionism*, is throughout inspired by the Guild idea. Specifically, as their Constitution states, it is "to put the organized working class in actual control of the system of production" to the end that they shall "be ready to take possession of it." They have long made overtures to workers in the textile industries and have given them financial assistance. They are irreconcilably at odds with the conservative element in the American Federation of Labor, which abhors their Socialism and their "industrial" unionism; but when the radical element in the Federation organized the great steel strike, bringing tens and hundreds of thousands of ignorant aliens into the Federation, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers saw a fruitful field for the new Socialism and contributed \$100,000 to the strikers—more than any single organization within the Federation.

This is only half the story, perhaps the less significant half. The idea of the democratization of industry is rapidly permeating the intellectual leaders of the nation—school teachers, college professors, clergymen, and even the heads of theological seminaries. In "progressive" journals of the type of *The New Republic* it is the sum and substance of opinion. Recent books, not only sociologic but historic, teem with it. Together with the cause of the League of Nations, it comprises most of the idealism, the aspiration and the hope that has resulted from the war; and, prominent as the League has become thanks to its involvement in politics, it is quite likely that Guild Socialism will prove the more permanent and powerful ferment.

It is indeed an attractive programme to every lover of his fellow men and of his nation, to every lover of democracy and freedom. Yet let us not be precipitate. It is possible that somewhere and somehow there is a fly in the amber. What is it that is forgotten—if anything? Curious phenomenon, is it not the very people who have conceived the new Socialism and most conspicuously championed it, the middle class? The phenome-

non is indeed curious; yet to the unimpassioned observer it would perhaps seem more strange if those who exercise their brains upon the problems of Sociology had remembered the brain worker.

One incident of the great year of unrest throws this middle-class Socialism into dramatic relief. The Interchurch World movement, which started as a drive to increase the wretchedly insufficient salaries of our clergymen, stepped aside to investigate the Steel strike. In its Report the Interchurch Committee appears to have been, to say the least, strangely abused—one hesitates to use common parlance with regard to a committee of nine prominent clergymen including three bishops. The character of the leaders of the strike was notorious: they were both “borers from within.” The committee had before it W. Z. Foster’s “red book” on Syndicalism in which with passionate eloquence he incites “the militant minority” to robbery and bloodshed. His refusal specifically to recant these opinions before the Senate Committee is passed over in the Report with an apparently disingenuous shift. With regard to Foster’s co-worker, John Fitzpatrick, the Report says nothing definite, attempting only to picture his burly leadership in a sympathetic light. There was nothing definite to say, from the point of view of apology. Fitzpatrick has always been a revolutionary. At the organization of the Farmer-Labor party he called upon the “workers” to “concentrate their efforts and do such a job as Russia has done” and to “take over the operation of their own country and their own government.”

In its investigation the Interchurch Committee accepted the aid of certain New York Socialists of the stripe of the leaders of the Garment Workers. The Report gives a stirring picture of the hardship of the lives of the common laborers and of the prevalence of the twelve-hour day. But of the welfare work of the Steel Company, and of the fact that the men manifestly prefer their life here to that of their homes in Europe, the Report says nothing. Nor is there any mention of the deepest evil in the situation—the fact that leaders in the world of capital, in order to swell their profits, have abetted the importation of brutal and ignorant aliens and have employed them under a régime which makes them raw material for the most dangerous propaganda

that has ever risen among us. The Report ends with a declaration in favor of the "democratization of the industry." It is a delicate question whether the Committee were conscious propagandists of the new Socialism or merely bamboozled by their "technical assistants" from "The Bureau of Social Research, New York." Fortunately it is a question that we are under no obligation to decide.

The story of those nine clergymen including three bishops is indeed symbolic. The average salary of the spiritual leaders of our nation is something less than \$1,000 a year. After the ruin of the Interchurch drive one denomination started a separate movement the slogan of which was: "A Parsonage and \$1,500!" Yet the average wage of the steel workers in 1919 was \$1,950. Such facts, of course, the Interchurch Report ignores. What is to be the limit, if any, to this self-prostration of the brains and of the racial integrity of the nation before the ignorant, passion-driven proletariat; of this self-immolation of its spiritual forces in behalf of "an American standard of living" for the offscourings of Europe?

Some limit there must be—and is. The most resolute dreamer, when he sees his vision wrought out in action, has a way of coming to. Local denominations, forced into their own little drives for a parsonage and \$1,500 a year, now know what they think of the grandiose Interchurch World committee. It is even possible that the nine clergymen, including three bishops, know what they think of themselves.

In Europe, where revolutions have a way of advancing faster and farther, the awakening from the folly of deifying the proletariat has been proportionately sudden and dramatic. The Bolsheviks "expropriated the expropriators"—that was the work of a few days. According to their schedule, which was as precisely thought out in the master mind of Lenin as the German advance upon Paris, only a brief transitional dictatorship separated them from realizing the truly democratic state. But time only hardened the dictatorship, solidified it to a crushing weight of lead, while the mirage of industrial democracy sped before, into an ever more distant and hazy future. Where was the miscalculation, the gap in the programme?

Was it not in Lenin's estimate of the middle class? At first he regarded them merely as the despised and hated bourgeoisie—the *bête noir* of all the tribe of Karl Marx; and as such he wreaked the class struggle upon them—robbed, starved, imprisoned, enslaved and foully murdered them. "Democracy," say the Guild Socialists, "is the inexhaustible well from which the nation draws its resources, human, economic, social, spiritual. All these are comprehended in democracy, and only in democracy. It is the ground out of which fructifies the seed of national life." But in Russia, as weeks and months went by, the seed did not fructify. Far from being able to adapt industry to the changing needs of the time, organized labor in control was powerless even to keep the wheels turning. Very soon Lenin was obliged to seek out the old managerial and technical forces—such of them as had not already been starved or shot—and employed them at advanced wages. They took up their posts and presumably did what they could, for if they had held back or "struck on the job" they and those dear to them would have had short shrift. But they made no headway. The Soviet workmen, even at their old familiar tasks, shirked and malingered.

The truth in the well is easily read today, even in the mud of its bottom. In the realm of industry there is more than labor, more than capital—more than the two combined and eager to work in harmony. The belly and the members are powerless without the brain that is strong and clear—free to lead and, where need is, to rule. And so, in this third decade of the century, even the still "revolutionary" Socialists are coming to suspect, in all countries, that each class has its rights; that the old world cannot be changed for a better one except through the coöperation of all its elements; that true freedom and efficiency are to be attained only by the interplay of all the infinitely varied forces of the modern industrial state.

This is the lesson that the English Guildsmen are learning, though reluctantly and with a wry face. When they have mastered it, or when we have mastered it before them, we shall all be thinking of a reconstruction of the nation in which the National Guild will supplant the territorial State.

JOHN CORBIN.